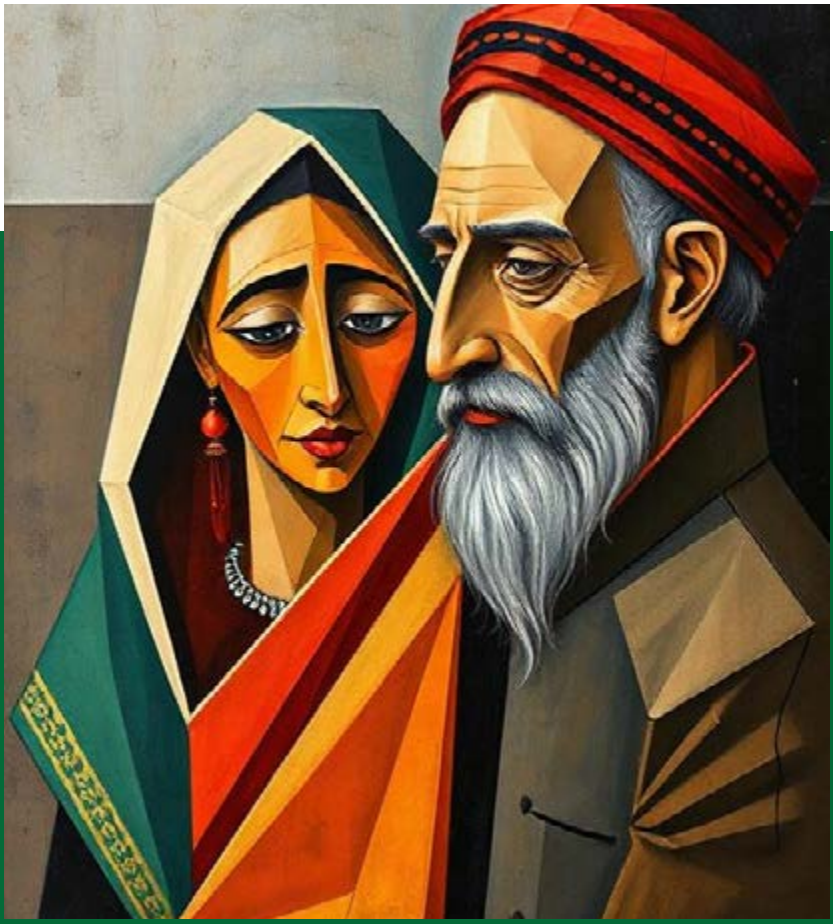
# INDIA'S OTHER 200 MILLION

AVANI DEVI



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# India's other 200 million

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For seventy years after independence, India narrated a comforting story to itself and the world. It was the tale of *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb,* the composite culture of the northern river plains where Hindus and Muslims shared dialects, culinary habits and a grudging respect for each other's holy days. On paper, it was a secular state by law; in the streets, it was a pluralist one by habit. That story is now out of print.

In its place, a new narrative has been bound and gilded. It is the story of the *Hindu Rashtra* or Hindu nation, a political construct where the 200 million minority citizens, comprising roughly 14% of the population, are no longer partners in a syncretic project but obstacles to a monolithic one. This is not a sudden coup or a chaotic putsch. It is a calculated constitutional rebranding, executed through the le-

gitimacy of ballot boxes, the precision of legal clauses, and a fundamental redefinition of what it means to belong.

Since 2014, Narendra Modi has governed not merely as a Prime Minister, but as the high priest of this transformation. His administration has weaponised the instruments of the state, citizenship, property and policing, not simply to sideline minorities but to legally encode their subordinate status. The old India, for all its flaws and occasional eruptions of communal violence, offered minorities a cold but equal citizenship. The new India offers them a warm but conditional tolerance, provided they accept their place in the shadow of the saffron canopy.

This dossier opens an inquiry into the "Minority Majority" a demographic paradox where a population of 200 million, larger than that of most sovereign nations, is being rendered politically silent and spatially invisible. To understand this shift, we must examine the three primary battlegrounds of this new dispensation.

**1. The Law: From Secularism to Statutes**

The first battleground is the courtroom and the legislature. Historically, Indian secularism was de-

fined as *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* (equal respect for all religions). Today, that principle is being legislated out of existence. Through instruments like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and various "anti-conversion" laws, the state has begun to link rights to religious identity. Law is no longer a shield for the vulnerable; it has become a scalpel used to carve the "infiltrator" away from the "refugee." By altering the legal definition of a citizen, the state creates a hierarchy of belonging that leaves millions in a state of permanent anxiety.

**2. Elections: The Engineering of Silence**

The second battleground is the electoral arena, where representation is being gerrymandered into oblivion. We are witnessing the rise of a "democracy without an opposition" regarding minority interests. Political parties, fearing the "appeasement" label, have largely retreated from fielding Muslim candidates or even mentioning minority rights in their manifestos. The result is a parliament that is increasingly unrepresentative of India's actual diversity. When a community of 200 million people finds itself without a meaningful voice in the halls of power, the "social contract" does not just fray, it dissolves.

### 3. Everyday Belonging: The Geography of Fear

Finally, there is the battleground of everyday belonging. This is perhaps the most insidious front, where residency has become a test of faith. From the "bulldozer justice" that sees minority homes demolished without due process to the rising walls of urban ghettos, the physical space for pluralism is shrinking. In the new India, a citizen's right to own property, to marry, or even to trade in the marketplace is increasingly dictated by their religious pedigree. The "othering" is no longer just a political rhetoric; it is a spatial reality.

This is an examination of the mechanics of marginalisation. It is a study of how a modern democracy can use the very tools of its freedom to build a cage for a significant portion of its people. We must move past the tired debate of whether India is becoming a Hindu state, that transition is largely an accomplished fact. The more urgent task is to ask what kind of Hindu state it is becoming.

Will it be a state that maintains the outward trappings of a republic while hollowing out its soul? Or will it be a state that eventually recognises that a monolithic identity cannot be imposed on a subcontinent of such staggering variety without breaking it?

As we delve into this dossier, we look at the human cost of this rebranding. We ask whether the 200 million can survive this transition with their dignity intact, or whether the "New India" is built on the requirement of their erasure. The "Minority Majority" stands at a crossroads, and with them, the very definition of Indian democracy.

## The architecture of exclusion How the citizenship amendment act redefined the idea of India

The 42nd Amendment to the Indian Constitution, enacted in 1976, performed a symbolic and legal surgery on the nation's founding document: it inserted the word 'Secular' into the Preamble. For more than four decades, that single word acted as both a shield for the minority and a mission statement for the state. It codified the 'Idea of India' a pluralistic project where citizenship was a civil contract, not a religious inheritance. However, in December 2019, the government of Narendra Modi passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and in doing so, effectively shattered the glass of that secular shield.

The CAA is a piece of legislation so surgically precise in its selective empathy that it reads like a legal indictment of the secular ideal. By decoupling the status of 'refugee' from the universal experience of

suffering and attaching it to the specific identity of the sufferer, the Act has fundamentally altered the DNA of Indian democracy.

On the surface, the CAA presents itself as a humanitarian intervention. It offers a fast track to citizenship for non-Muslim refugees, specifically Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis, and Christians, fleeing religious persecution from three neighbouring Islamic republics: Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. The cut-off date is set at 31 December 2014.

The common variable cited by the state is persecution. The glaring, systematic exception is Islam. By explicitly naming six religions and omitting one, the Indian state has, for the first time in its independent history, made religion a deterministic test for eligibility for state protection. The message emanating from New Delhi is unmistakable: if you are a Muslim fleeing slaughter or sectarian violence in Lahore or Kabul, the Indian border is a wall; if you are a Hindu or a Sikh, it is a sanctuary.

The legal fiction that India is a 'natural home for all the persecuted' has collapsed into a narrower, more exclusionary reality. India is being rebranded not as a post-colonial republic, but as a *Hindu Rashtra*

(Hindu Nation) in waiting, a homeland primarily for those within the Dharmic fold.

To understand the full magnitude of this shift, one must look beyond the CAA in isolation. Its true potency lies in its silent partner: the National Register of Citizens (NRC). If the CAA is the door left open for some, the NRC is the trapdoor designed for others.

The NRC is a proposed bureaucratic exercise intended to identify 'illegal immigrants' by requiring every resident to produce documentary evidence of their ancestry and legal right to be in the country. In a nation where land records are often oral, birth certificates are a luxury of the urban elite, and annual floods in rural belts frequently wash away paper trails, this is a gargantuan task.

The pilot test for this exercise in the state of Assam provided a harrowing preview of the human cost. Approximately 1.9 million people, roughly 6% of the state's population, found themselves left off the list. While this group included both Hindus and Muslims, the interplay between the two laws creates a hierarchy of safety. Under the CAA, a Hindu, Sikh, or Christian left off the NRC can claim they are a persecuted refugee from a neighbouring country and

seek a path back to legality. A Muslim in the same position has no such recourse. They are transformed, overnight, from a native to a 'stateless' person.

This is the 'pincer movement' of modern Indian majoritarianism: one law offers papers to the Hindu migrant, while the other demands impossible papers from the Muslim native.

The demographic stakes of these legislative shifts are significant. According to the 2011 Census (the last comprehensive data set available), India's religious composition is as follows:

**Religious Group/ Percentage of Population (2011)**

Hindu: 79.8%
Muslim: 14.2%
Christian: 2.3%
Sikh: 1.7%
Buddhist: 0.7%
Jain: 0.4%
Other/Unstated: 0.9%

While the government argues that the CAA affects only a small number of migrants, the psychological impact on the 172 million-strong Muslim population is profound. By creating a legal framework that treats

them as the only group whose presence is 'conditional' or 'suspect', the state has effectively relegated them to second-class status.

Critics and legal scholars have described this era as one of 'executive aggrandisement' dressed in judicial and legislative robes. The government did not need to bulldoze every mosque to signal its intent (though the demolition of the Babri Masjid and subsequent events have provided a stark backdrop); it merely needed to change the definitions of 'illegal' versus 'refugee'.

In this new India, the definition of a 'son of the soil' has shifted from a territorial identity to a theological one. A Hindu without a birth certificate is viewed through the lens of a 'displaced brother' who belongs to the land by divine right. Conversely, a Muslim with a ten-generation pedigree is increasingly cast as a *ghuspaithiye* (infiltrator) until they can prove otherwise to a potentially hostile bureaucracy.

This shift undermines the basic premise of Article 14 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees equality before the law to *any person* within the territory of India, not just citizens. By introducing a religious filter into citizenship, the state has bypassed the 'Reasonable Classification' test, which stipulates that

any legal distinction must have a rational nexus to the objective of the law. If the objective is to protect the persecuted, why exclude the Ahmadis of Pakistan, the Hazaras of Afghanistan, or the Rohingya of Myanmar? Their exclusion reveals that the objective is not the relief of suffering, but the consolidation of a specific national identity.

India's turn inward is not happening in a vacuum. It mirrors a global retreat from liberal internationalism toward 'blood and soil' nationalism. However, India's experiment is unique because of its scale and its history. The 1947 Partition was a trauma defined by the rejection of the 'Two-Nation Theory' (the idea that Hindus and Muslims could not inhabit the same state) by India's founders. Nehru and Ambedkar envisioned India as the antidote to the religious exclusivity of Pakistan.

By adopting the logic of the CAA, India is effectively conceding the argument to the ghosts of 1947. It is adopting the very logic it once sought to transcend: that a state's primary duty is to a specific religious community rather than its universal citizenry.

The CAA is more than a migration policy; it is a signal of a new social contract. It tells the minority

that their safety is a matter of state indulgence rather than constitutional right. It tells the majority that their identity is the primary qualification for belonging.

As detention centres are constructed and legal challenges wind their way through a burdened court system, the 'Secular' preamble remains on paper, but its spirit is being hollowed out. The 'Idea of India' once a sprawling, chaotic, but inclusive experiment, is being narrowed into a fortress. In this fortress, the walls are not built of stone, but of statutes and certificates. The tragedy of the CAA is not just who it keeps out, but what it does to those it keeps in: it forces a nation of a billion people to define themselves by who they are allowed to hate.

If the 42nd Amendment gave India a shield, the CAA has turned the state into a sword. The question that remains for the coming decade is whether the institutions of Indian democracy, the judiciary, the press, and the electorate, have the resolve to blunt that edge before the secular fabric is torn beyond repair.

## The cartography of silence Delimitation and the fragmentation of the Muslim vote

If the law defines the enemy, geography neutralises them. In the pantheon of democratic weapons, few are as effective or as deceptively mundane, as delimitation, the redrawing of electoral boundaries. As India prepares for its first major delimitation exercise after 2026, a significant portion of its population is facing what can only be described as a cartographic ambush. The pencil of the census official is proving to be mightier than the sword of the extremist, slicing through demographic strongholds with surgical precision to ensure that while everyone has a vote, not everyone has a voice.

Currently, Muslims make up approximately **14.2% to 15%** of India's population, yet their representation in the corridors of power tells a vastly different story. They hold less than **5%** of the seats in the Lok Sabha, a gross disproportionality that would trigger a constitutional crisis in almost any other functional democracy. The 2024 General Elections returned only **24 Muslim MPs** to a house of 543. More tellingly, the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) returned exactly zero Muslim representatives.

This is not merely a failure of political meritocracy or a lack of suitable candidates; it is a triumph of geometry. Political scientists often refer to this as "wasted votes." When a community's numbers are high but its legislative presence is low, it suggests that the electoral system is no longer a mirror of the people, but a prism that refracts and diminishes specific identities.

The proposed 131st Amendment aims to unlock a seat count that has been frozen since the 1970s, potentially expanding the Lok Sabha to nearly **850 members**. On paper, this is a necessary democratic correction. India's population has boomed, and the ratio of constituents to representatives is currently one of the highest in the world. However, in practice,

the expansion provides a blank canvas for gerrymandering on a staggering scale.

The methodology employed is a classic of electoral suppression known as **"cracking."** This involves splitting high-density minority areas into multiple constituencies. Consider the Seemanchal region of Bihar or the border districts of Assam. In these areas, a concentrated minority voting bloc of **30% to 40%** acts as a "kingmaker," capable of swinging a seat and forcing mainstream parties to address their specific grievances.

However, by redrawing the lines, that 30% concentration can be fragmented into three separate seats where the minority population drops to **10% or 15%**. In a first-past-the-post system, a 15% bloc is effectively powerless. They become a "permanent minority" in every single district, their votes rendered mathematically irrelevant to the final outcome. The map-maker does not need to take away the right to vote; they simply need to ensure the vote cannot win.

We do not need to speculate on how this looks in practice; we only need to look at Assam. The 2023 delimitation exercise in the state was a masterclass in demographic dilution. By shifting boundaries under the guise of "administrative convenience" and "cul-

tural protection," the number of Muslim-majority assembly seats was reduced from **35 to 22,** a nearly **40% virtual eviction** from the legislative process.

In Assam, the process was explicitly tied to the protection of "indigenous" interests, a term that has become a bureaucratic euphemism for excluding the religious minority. By the time the ink dried on the new maps, the political geography of the state had been altered more fundamentally than by any riot or migration. The minority majority was drawn out of existence, one constituency at a time.

Perhaps the most cynical tool in the cartographic arsenal is the weaponisation of the women's quota. The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, which reserves one-third of seats for women, is a landmark piece of legislation. However, the selection of which specific seats are reserved is where the "Cartography of Silence" operates most effectively.

There is a documented trend of reserving seats for women (or Scheduled Castes/Tribes) in areas with high minority concentrations. In many conservative minority pockets, patriarchal strictures remain a significant barrier. Female voter turnout in these regions is often easier to suppress, and female candidacy, particularly from within the minority community itself, is rare.

By reserving a "Muslim-heavy" seat for women, the state can simultaneously claim to be championing gender progressive values while effectively silencing the minority male political voice. It creates a vacuum that is often filled by "proxy" candidates from the majority community or party loyalists who do not represent the demographic reality of the area. It is a pincer movement: the minority identity is squeezed between the rhetoric of women's empowerment and the reality of political erasure.

The 2026 delimitation does not only threaten religious minorities; it threatens the federal equilibrium of the entire nation. Because the new seat distribution will be based on current population figures, states in North India (the "Hindi Heartland") that have failed to control population growth will be rewarded with a massive influx of new seats. Conversely, Southern states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, which have successfully implemented family planning and social development goals, will see their relative political weight plummet.

In these Southern states, the minority question takes on a different hue. Christians in Kerala and Goa, and linguistic minorities across the Deccan, face a similar dilution. When the Lok Sabha expands

to 850, the "centre of gravity" will shift so decisively toward the North that the diverse social contracts of the South and the East will be rendered voiceless in the federal budget and national policy.

The cumulative effect of these manoeuvres is the creation of a "hollowed-out" democracy. In this model, the rituals of voting remain, the purple ink, the long queues, the electronic voting machines but the outcome is pre-determined by the geometry of the map.

When a community of 200 million people feels that the legislative doors are structurally barred against them, the social contract begins to fray. Representation is the safety valve of a republic. When you seal that valve through cartographic trickery, the pressure does not disappear; it merely seeks other, often more volatile, outlets.

The 2026 delimitation must not be viewed as a mere administrative update. It is a foundational shift in the Indian project. If the redrawing of boundaries continues to be used as a tool for "cracking" concentrated blocs and "packing" others, the resulting maps will not be a guide to the nation's geography, but a blueprint for its fragmentation. The silence being

mapped out today will be the loudest sound in the India of tomorrow.

Table: Comparative Representation in Lok Sabha (Approximate)

| | Muslim Population % | Muslim MP Share % | Gap (Under-representation) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | ~11.1% | 9.0% | 2.1% |
| | ~13.4% | 6.6% | 6.8% |
| | ~14.2% | 4.2% | 10.0% |
| | ~14.5% | 4.4% | 10.1% |

As India approaches this crossroads, the question remains, will the new map reflect the vibrant, messy plurality of its people, or will it be a cartography of silence, drawn to ensure that some citizens are seen but never heard?

## Waqf, seizures and the economics of exclusion

Political marginalisation is the symptom; economic strangulation is the disease. In the evolving landscape of India's sociopolitical identity, the latest front in the Hindutva project is no longer the brick and mortar of the temple, but the ink and seal of the land deed. The target is the Waqf, the Islamic religious endowment that manages over 600,000 properties across the subcontinent, including graveyards, mosques, orphanages, and schools. While the global media often focuses on the high-octane rhetoric of street-level communalism, a quieter, more systemic dispossession is taking place through the corridors of legislative bureaucracy.

The Waqf (Amendment) Act of 2025 is a masterclass in the "hostile takeover" disguised as a neutral administrative reform. For centuries, Waqf boards have operated as autonomous custodians of community wealth, governed by the principle of *waqif*, the dedication of property for pious or charitable purposes under Islamic law. These boards were designed to ensure that the intentions of the donor remained inviolable across generations. However, the new legislation mandates the induction of non-Muslim officers and government appointees onto these boards.

This move effectively hands the keys of the Islamic trust to the state-aligned majority. To put the gravity of this into perspective, it is akin to putting the Vatican's internal finances and theological assets under the supervision of a secular bank manager appointed by a committee of atheists. By diluting the religious character of the board's composition, the state is not "secularising" the institution; it is stripping it of its representative autonomy.

Perhaps the most devastating clause within the 2025 rules is the repeal of the "Waqf by user" doctrine. Historically, Indian law recognised that religious practice often precedes formal bureaucracy. If a community had used a plot of land as a graveyard

or a prayer ground for centuries, it was legally recognised as Waqf, even if the original title deed from the Mughal or Colonial eras had been lost to time.

Under the new regulations, usage is no longer proof of existence. Without contemporary, state-verified paperwork, such land reverts to the state. Given the notoriously poor record-keeping in India's rural heartlands and the chaotic transitions of the 1947 Partition, this has placed every unregistered mosque and every ancestral grave at an existential risk. In a country where many citizens lack personal identification documents, demanding centuries-old title deeds for community land is a deliberate strategy of exclusion. It transforms a historical reality into a legal fiction, making the state the ultimate arbiter of what constitutes "sacred" space.

This legislative shift is not merely about theological dominance; it is a calculated play for prime real estate. Waqf properties are not just located in remote villages; they occupy some of the most valuable land in urban centres like Lucknow, Delhi and Hyderabad. These are the lungs of the city, large tracts of land that have resisted the sprawl of commercial development for centuries.

By neutering the Waqf boards and centralising the power to "reclassify" land, the state clears the path for massive infrastructure projects, luxury high-rise towers and "development" initiatives without the "inconvenience" of seeking minority consent. The narrative of "unlocking land value" becomes a convenient mask for the transfer of wealth. When the state can unilaterally decide that a centuries-old graveyard is "disputed" or "government land," the property of the minority effectively becomes the property of the majority's corporate allies.

To understand the scale of Waqf holdings, one must look at the numbers. The Waqf boards in India manage approximately **600,000 to 800,000 properties**, making them the third-largest landholder in the country, trailing only the Indian Railways and the Ministry of Defence. This vast portfolio represents a massive communal safety net. The revenue generated from these properties is intended to fund scholarships, maintain hospitals, and support the destitute.

| Landholder | Estimated Acreage/Property Count |
|---|---|
| **Indian Railways** | ~1.1 million acres |
| **Ministry of Defence** | ~1.7 million acres |

| Landholder | Estimated Acreage/Property Count |
|---|---|
| **Waqf Boards** | ~600,000+ properties / 600,000 acres |

When the state intervenes in the management of these assets, it isn't just managing land; it is disrupting the financial lifeblood of a community that already sits at the bottom of many socioeconomic indices. According to the Sachar Committee Report, Indian Muslims face significant barriers in education and employment; the Waqf system was one of the few indigenous mechanisms capable of addressing these gaps.

The psychological impact of these seizures cannot be overstated. If the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) were seen by critics as a way to strip Muslims of their future in India, the Waqf Amendment acts as a mechanism to strip them of their past.

A graveyard is not just a plot of earth; it is a testament to a community's long-term presence and belonging to the soil. By rendering these spaces vulnerable to "reclamation" or commercial redevelopment, the state is performing a form of cartographic cleansing. It removes the physical markers of Islamic her-

itage from the public square, reinforcing a singular nationalist narrative that views the "Other" as a transient guest rather than a foundational stakeholder.

Proponents of the 2025 Act argue that the Waqf boards were riddled with corruption and inefficiency. While it is true that many boards suffered from mismanagement and internal disputes, the solution to administrative failure is usually transparency and digitisation, not the subversion of the board's religious mandate. The government's approach has been to "burn the house down to fix a leak."

By framing the issue as one of "transparency," the state gains moral high ground in the eyes of the general public. Yet, the same standards of "transparency" and "non-religious oversight" are rarely applied to the management of Hindu temple trusts or the vast holdings of other religious denominations. This asymmetry highlights the targeted nature of the legislation.

As India moves further into the 21st century, the nature of communal conflict is shifting from the visceral to the structural. The "economics of exclusion" is a quieter, more permanent form of marginalisation. It does not require a riot; it only requires a signature on a sub-clause of an amendment.

The Waqf (Amendment) Act of 2025 serves as a chilling reminder that in the quest for a monolithic national identity, even the dead are not allowed to rest in peace if their resting place sits on "prime real estate." When the state becomes the owner of a community's history and the manager of its charities, the concept of a pluralistic democracy begins to wither. The land deed has become the new weapon of choice, and the map of India is being redrawn, one seizure at a time.

## Segregation and the structural failure of public goods

The architectural footprint of a nation is often the most honest map of its soul. In India, this map is increasingly revealing a landscape of profound fragmentation. While the gleaming glass towers of the "New India" capture the global imagination, a quieter, more insidious transformation is taking place within the urban and rural interior. The loss of political power and legal standing for India's minorities is being mirrored by a physical retreat into the shadows, a process of spatial marginalisation that is turning the concept of equal citizenship into a geographic impossibility.

Data from a 2025 working paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) provides what many scholars are calling the empirical "smok-

ing gun": India's Muslims and Scheduled Castes (SCs) live in conditions as segregated as Black Americans in the Jim Crow South. This is not merely a metaphor for social distance; it is a quantified reality of spatial exclusion that defines who gets to drink clean water, who gets to learn, and who is left to navigate the "rot and absence" of the state.

The NBER study, which meticulously mapped 1.5 million neighbourhoods across the subcontinent, found that the "mohalla" the traditional neighbourhood has become a site of systemic deprivation. The findings are stark: Muslim-majority areas are not just culturally or socially separate; they are systematically starved of the foundational blocks of modernity.

When comparing two neighbourhoods of identical socio-economic status, the variable of religious composition becomes the primary determinant of infrastructure. A fully Muslim neighbourhood is **10% less likely** to have access to piped water and, perhaps most damningly, **50% less likely** to have a secondary school compared to a neighbourhood with zero Muslims. This disparity is not a natural byproduct of poverty or a choice of the community; it is a calculated failure of the *panchayat* (local government) and municipal bureaucracies.

In the Indian administrative context, the distribution of public goods is rarely a neutral, meritocratic process. It is a system built on *sifarish,* the power of recommendation and social connection. Because these minority neighbourhoods are socially isolated from the corridors of power, they lack the "social capital" needed to extract resources from a local bureaucracy that remains overwhelmingly dominated by the Hindu majority. The result is a landscape where two neighbourhoods in the same city, voting for the same Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), can effectively live in different centuries. One boasts paved roads, reliable electricity, and a functional clinic; the other is defined by open sewers, intermittent power, and a three-mile trek to the nearest hospital.

The study highlights a critical divergence between the experiences of Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Muslims. While both groups face significant prejudice, the institutional framework of the Indian state treats them very differently. Through decades of affirmative action, specifically the reservation of seats in local bodies, state assemblies and parliament, Scheduled Castes have managed to build a degree of political leverage.

A Hindu Dalit can, theoretically and often prac-

tically, become the village chief or a powerful local councillor. This "reserved" political space acts as a pressure valve, ensuring that at least some resources are diverted to Dalit-majority hamlets. The "concrete ghetto" for Scheduled Castes has shown slight signs of cracking, as political representation translates into paved roads and schools.

However, the Indian reservation system is built exclusively on the pillar of caste, not religion. This creates a unique and devastating invisibility for the Muslim community, including the "Pasmanda" (marginalised) Muslims who share the same socio-economic and ancestral heritage as Hindu Dalits. Because India does not offer reservations based on religious identity, the Muslim Dalit remains invisible to the state's compensatory mechanisms. Without a "reserved" lever to pull, the Muslim mohalla is left to the whims of a majority-led bureaucracy that often views their presence with either apathy or active hostility.

This form of segregation represents a transition from "de jure" (legal) exclusion to "de facto" (practical) containment. The state does not need to pass laws to evict certain citizens or build physical walls to keep them in check. It can achieve the same result through the "suffocation of neglect."

When a secondary school is not built in a Muslim-majority ward, the state is not just failing to provide education; it is effectively capping the social mobility of an entire generation. When piped water stops at the boundary of a minority enclave, the state is communicating a hierarchy of human value. This is the "minority majority" being contained, not behind razor wire, but behind a wall of broken pipes, unlit streets, and missing textbooks.

The psychological toll of this "everyday belonging" is a constant negotiation with absence. For the resident of the concrete ghetto, the state is not a protector or a provider, but a phantom that appears only for tax collection or policing. The "rot" is not just in the sewers; it is in the social contract itself.

To understand the scale of this "physical retreat," one must look at the widening gap in public asset ownership and access. Recent data indicators provide a snapshot of this fractured reality:

- **Educational Access:** In urban areas, the literacy rate for Muslims is roughly **70%**, trailing behind the national average of **74%**, and significantly behind the Hindu "Upper" castes. The lack of secondary schools in their immediate vicinity directly correlates to a higher dropout rate at age 14.

- **Housing Segregation:** In major metros like Ahmedabad, Mumbai, and Delhi, the "dissimilarity index" a measure of how many people would have to move to create an even distribution, is reaching levels seen in the most segregated cities of the United States (scoring between **0.6 and 0.7**).

- **Healthcare Deserts:** Muslim-majority enclaves have **30% fewer** government-run primary health centres per capita than the national average, forcing residents to rely on expensive, unregulated private practitioners or go without care.

The emergence of the concrete ghetto is not merely a humanitarian concern; it is a systemic threat to India's democratic aspirations. When geography becomes destiny, the concept of a "commonwealth" dissolves. The NBER data suggests that the segregation in India is becoming "fossilised" meaning that as cities grow, they are growing *into* their prejudices rather than out of them.

The failure of public goods is the ultimate "slow violence." It does not make headlines like a riot or a legal decree, but its effects are more permanent. It ensures that the children of the ghetto start the race

of life miles behind their peers, not because of a lack of talent, but because of the postcode of their birth.

If India is to truly claim its place as a leading global power, it must address the "broken pipes" of its internal democracy. A nation cannot soar when a significant portion of its citizenry is anchored to the ground by the weight of systemic neglect. The wall of missing textbooks is just as formidable as any stone rampart and until it is dismantled, the promise of equal citizenship will remain an unfinished blueprint.

## Modi, the Ram Mandir and the politics of symbolism

The legal and economic architecture of modern India would be insufficient without the emotional glue of ritual. The inauguration of the Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir in Ayodhya in January 2024 was not merely a religious ceremony; it was the symbolic coronation of a new constitutional order. By taking the *darshan* (holy viewing) of Ram Lalla, Narendra Modi was not acting as a Prime Minister within a secular framework; he was acting as the *Raja* (King) of a civilisational state. This moment marked the transition from a republic governed by a Western-style social contract to a polity defined by *Dharma* and the primacy of the majority.

For the Muslim population watching the ceremony, the symbolism was starkly violent. The temple sits on the debris of the Babri Masjid, a 16th-century mosque demolished by *karsevaks* (Hindu volunteers) in 1992, an act the Supreme Court itself called an "egregious violation of the rule of law." Yet, in a paradoxical turn, the same Court gave the land to the Hindus in 2019, citing faith as a justification, a legal principle previously unknown in property law. The message to the Muslim minority, which comprises roughly 14.2% of India's 1.4 billion people (approximately 200 million citizens), was clear: your history is reversible; your holy sites are temporary tenancies.

Professor Arjun Appadurai notes that this shift brings India into an "emotional regime" where the majority feels a sense of righteous reclaiming. This is not merely about a building; it is about the psychological restoration of a perceived historical wrong. However, when the majority reclaims, the minority is often displaced. The minority is transformed into a "second-class population," not through explicit ballots or the formal removal of voting rights, but through a cultural coup.

Every new district name, Allahabad to Prayagraj, Faizabad to Ayodhya, Mughalsarai to Deen Day-

al Upadhyaya Nagar, serves as a linguistic eviction notice. These are not merely administrative changes; they are attempts to scrub the Persianate and Islamic influence from the Indian map, asserting that the "true" identity of the land is exclusively Vedic. This erasure suggests that the medieval period of Indian history was nothing more than an "interrupted" Hindu timeline, effectively delegitimising the contributions and presence of millions.

This symbolic politics has a practical, measurable effect: it legitimises exclusion at the grassroots. When the Prime Minister speaks of *Bhakts* (devotees) as the true sons of the soil, it becomes socially acceptable for the private sector and civil society to enforce a silent apartheid.

- **Housing Discrimination:** In urban hubs like Noida and Gurugram, "no Muslim" policies in residential societies have become a common, albeit informal, phenomenon. Studies by the UN and various NGOs have highlighted that Muslims find it significantly harder to rent or buy property in "integrated" neighbourhoods, leading to increased ghettoisation.

- **Economic Disparity:** Statistics from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) consistently show that Muslims have the lowest Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) among all religious groups in India, hovering around 33-35%, compared to roughly 40-42% for Hindus and Sikhs.

- **The Judiciary and Representation:** While Muslims make up over 14% of the population, their representation in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament) has historically struggled to cross 5%. In the current political climate, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has, at times, had zero Muslim Members of Parliament in both houses.

The performance of piety provides the moral cover for more direct forms of marginalisation. The majority becomes "the nation," while the minority is framed as the guest who has overstayed their welcome. This rhetoric has moved from the fringes of the *Sangh Parivar* to the centre of the state's executive branch.

When the Prime Minister refers to those who "can be identified by their clothes" during protests, or uses terms like "infiltrators" during election campaigns,

he provides a dog-whistle for vigilante groups. The rise of "Cow Vigilantism" is perhaps the most visceral example. According to data tracked by various human rights organisations (as official government data on lynchings remains sparse), the vast majority of victims of cattle-related violence are Muslims and Dalits. These acts are rarely about the animal; they are ritualistic displays of dominance intended to remind the minority of their place in the new hierarchy.

The Ram Mandir is the crown jewel of a broader legal project designed to redefine who belongs. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), coupled with the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC), creates a framework where religion becomes a criterion for citizenship for the first time in independent India's history. By fast-tracking citizenship for non-Muslim refugees from neighbouring countries, the law implies that India is a natural home for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Christians, but an elective (and potentially temporary) one for Muslims.

The judiciary, once seen as the final bulwark of secularism, has increasingly adopted the language of the "collective conscience" of the majority. The Ayodhya judgement was the zenith of this trend, where

the court prioritised the "uninterrupted faith" of the Hindu community over the documented legal title of the mosque. This sets a precarious precedent: if faith can override property law once, it can do so for the thousands of other mosques currently under litigation by right-wing groups, such as those in Varanasi and Mathura.

The psychological impact on the Muslim community is one of profound alienation. When the state participates so vibrantly in the religious rituals of the majority, the "secular" state effectively ceases to exist. The public square is now saturated with saffron flags and religious chants that have been weaponised as political slogans.

This environment has led to a "taxi aggregator" level of bias, where names alone trigger a refusal of service. In several reported instances, Muslim delivery drivers or cab drivers have been harassed or refused entry into gated communities. This is the "Banality of Evil" in a digital age: discrimination mediated through apps and real estate brochures, sanctioned by the silent approval of the state.

India is currently undergoing a fundamental redefinition. The transition from a Constitutional Democracy to a Civilisational State requires the dismantling

of the old symbols of pluralism. The Ram Mandir is the ultimate symbol of this new India, a monument that represents both a spiritual home for millions and a tombstone for the Nehruvian secular ideal.

As the "emotional regime" takes hold, the majority feels a sense of euphoria, a feeling of finally "winning" their own country back. But this victory comes at a heavy cost to the democratic fabric. A nation that defines its identity through the exclusion of 200 million of its own citizens is a nation at war with itself. The performance of piety by the leadership is not just a show of devotion; it is a declaration of a new hierarchy where the minority is invited to live, but only on the condition of their invisibility. The "Raja" has been crowned, but the "Praja" (the people) are now divided by an unbridgeable chasm of faith and fear.

## Riots, rent, and the cost of safety

The financial cost of being a minority in contemporary India is rising faster than inflation. This economic squeeze is most evident in the "riot economy" of the country's rapidly expanding urban centres. Communal violence, once largely a rural or small-town phenomenon, has evolved into a sophisticated tool for urban gentrification and structural displacement. Under the current political climate, the city is no longer a site of cosmopolitan promise for the minority; it has become a theatre of orchestrated precarity.

In the university towns of North India or the sprawling hubs of the National Capital Region (NCR), a riot or a "clash" often follows a choreographed script. These incidents are frequently triggered by the flim-

siest of pretexts, the volume of the *Azaan* (call to prayer), a dispute over a religious procession, or allegations regarding the slaughter of a cow. However, the aftermath is where the true economic architecture of the violence reveals itself.

The state's response triggers a predictable economic cascade. First, the police impose curfews and "preventative" lockdowns. Statistically, these measures fall disproportionately on Muslim-owned businesses. While Hindu-dominated markets often remain sporadically open or receive tacit permission to operate, Muslim-owned shops are shuttered for weeks. For a small business owner, fourteen days of lost revenue in a high-rent urban environment is often the difference between sustainability and bankruptcy.

Second, the distribution of "relief" packages is mediated through the District Magistrate's office. Human rights monitors have repeatedly documented that these offices, influenced by the prevailing political winds, are rarely sympathetic to minority claims. Compensation for destroyed property is either tied up in years of litigation or denied outright due to "lack of documentation" a common hurdle for those living in older, informally settled urban pockets.

The most insidious phase of this cycle is the emergence of "riot capitalists." When communal tension becomes a permanent feature of a neighbourhood, property values in minority-concentrated areas crash. Fear is a powerful market depressant. Residents, fearing for their physical safety and seeing no future for their children in a besieged enclave, become desperate to sell.

This creates an opening for developers who specialise in distressed assets. There is a documented pattern of Hindu-majority development firms purchasing Muslim-owned properties at 30–40% of their market value in the wake of violence. Within months of the "ghetto" being cleared or subdued, the state often re-zones the area. What was once a vibrant, if crowded, minority quarter is transformed into a high-rise luxury complex or a commercial hub. In this context, violence is not a loss of control by the state; it is a function of the state. It serves as a violent form of eminent domain that facilitates the transfer of prime urban land from the marginalised to the politically connected elite.

The economic marginalisation of India's Muslims is not merely anecdotal; it is reflected in the stark numbers of national surveys. According to the Pe-

riodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), Muslims have the lowest Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) among all religious groups in India, standing at approximately **35.1%**, compared to the national average of around **40%**.

In urban areas, the gap is even more pronounced regarding the "quality" of employment. Statistics show that:

- **Self-Employment:** Nearly **50%** of urban Muslims are self-employed, often in the informal sector (mechanics, artisans, petty traders), which is the most vulnerable to curfew-induced shocks.

- **Regular Salaried Jobs:** Only about **21%** of Muslims in urban centres hold regular salaried jobs, compared to nearly **30%** of the Hindu population and even higher percentages among other minorities like Christians and Sikhs.

- **Consumption Expenditure:** Data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) indicates that the Mean Per Capita Expenditure (MPCE) for Muslims is the lowest in the country. In urban settings, a Muslim household

spends, on average, **32%** less than a high-caste Hindu household.

For the middle-class minority, the "urban price" manifests as a literal tax on their presence. To rent a house in a "posh" or upscale locality, a Muslim professional must navigate a gauntlet of discriminatory hurdles. This "housing apartheid" is rarely encoded in law but is strictly enforced by Residents' Welfare Associations (RWAs) and real estate agents.

A Muslim tenant is often forced to:

1. Pay a "security deposit" that is **20–50% higher** than the standard rate.

2. Secure a Hindu "guarantor" to vouch for their "good character."

3. Agree to restrictive lifestyle covenants regarding food (vegetarianism) and visitors that are not applied to other tenants.

When these conditions cannot be met, the individual is met with outright rejection. This systemic exclusion pushes the middle-class minority back into the same congested, underserved ghettos as the poor. The result is a lack of "spatial mobility." While a middle-class Hindu can move from a crowded suburb to

a gated community as their income rises, a Muslim's wealth does not necessarily buy them the right to leave the ghetto.

The sociological impact of this economic siege is the "sacrifice of aspiration." In the neoliberal city, safety has become a luxury good. For the approximately 200 million Muslims in India, the city has become a hostile bidder. It demands that they choose between two bleak realities:

- **Internal Exile:** Remaining in the ghetto, where physical safety is higher due to numbers, but where infrastructure is crumbling, schools are subpar, and economic opportunities are stagnant.

- **External Exile:** For those with the means, the primary goal is no longer to build a life within India, but to secure a visa to the Gulf, Europe, or North America. This "brain drain" of minority talent is a silent loss to the Indian economy, stripping it of diverse entrepreneurial energy.

The state's role in this is further cemented through the strategic withdrawal of infrastructure. Urban planning in many Indian states now follows a "dual

city" model. Ghettoised areas are often denied the "Smart City" funding allocated to neighbouring Hindu-majority wards. Roads remain unpaved, sewage systems are left to overflow, and municipal schools are chronically underfunded.

This infrastructure gap acts as a secondary economic tax. Residents of these areas must pay more for private water tankers, private healthcare, and private generators, further depleting their disposable income. It is a feedback loop, violence lowers property values; lower values lead to state neglect; neglect reinforces the "slum" status of the area; and the "slum" status justifies future "redevelopment" through further violence or administrative clearing.

The "Urban Price" is not just a matter of rupees and paise; it is the cost of a shrinking citizenship. When the market, the police, and the property developer align to make the city uninhabitable for a specific community, the democratic fabric of the nation is fundamentally compromised.

As India seeks to project itself as a global economic powerhouse, the "riot economy" remains its greatest internal contradiction. A nation cannot achieve sustained double-digit growth while simultaneously

engineering the economic displacement of 14% of its population. For the urban minority, the dream of the city, as a place of anonymity, meritocracy, and progress, is being replaced by the reality of the fortress. Unless the state moves from being a "functionary of violence" to a guarantor of equal urban rights, the cost of safety will eventually become a price that the entire Indian economy will have to pay.

## The post-Modi horizon
## The rise of a majoritarian normalcy

What happens after Narendra Modi? This is the existential question that haunts the dinner tables of the minority elite and the corridors of Delhi's dwindling liberal circles. For years, the conventional wisdom amongst the intelligentsia was that Modi represented a temporary aberration, a charismatic strongman whose eventual departure from the stage would naturally restore India's secular equilibrium. This, however, is increasingly revealed as a comforting fiction. It ignores a fundamental transformation, Modi has not merely built a personality cult; he has constructed a self-sustaining institutional ecosystem.

The "Modi era" is not a fleeting seasonal shift in Indian politics; it is a permanent change in the country's climate. Even as the sun eventually sets on his personal leadership, the heat of the fire he has lit will

continue to bake the soil of the Indian republic for generations. We are entering an era of majoritarian normalcy.

The fundamental mistake of the opposition has been to view the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a standard political vehicle. It is not. It is the electoral wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an ideological parent that has spent a century preparing for this moment. Over the last decade, the RSS has effectively "cadre-ised" the Indian bureaucracy.

From the local district magistrate to the village police constable, the tenets of Hindutva, Hindu national identity, have become the default operating system of the state. It is no longer necessary for a minister to issue a specific decree for a mosque to be surveyed or for a protest to be suppressed; the "Deep State" now understands its mission through a majoritarian lens. The civil service, once heralded as the "steel frame" of India, has been reforged. Its new alloys are tempered in the fires of cultural nationalism.

This systemic shift means that even if the BJP were to lose a general election, a prospect rendered increasingly unlikely by a fragmented and visionless opposition, the machinery of the state would remain inherently hostile to the previous secular consen-

sus. A change in the Prime Minister's Office would not necessarily result in a change in the police station or the courtroom. The roots of majoritarianism have grown deep into the bedrock of the judiciary, the media, and the educational curriculum. To pull them out would require a revolutionary effort that no current political force is prepared to undertake.

The INDIA bloc, a fragile coalition of regional satraps and a diminished Congress party, finds itself in a strategic and moral bind. To win elections, they are mathematically dependent on the Muslim vote. Yet, to govern or even to campaign effectively, they live in mortal fear of being labelled "appeasers" by a hostile and hyper-partisan press corps.

This fear has led to a pathetic spectacle of political mimicry. We see opposition leaders embarking on temple runs, asserting their Brahminical credentials, and maintaining a conspicuous silence on issues that affect the very voters who sustain them. The opposition has largely accepted the BJP's premise: that Muslims are a "vote bank" to be managed or exploited, rather than citizens with distinct constitutional grievances to be addressed.

There is currently no mainstream liberal party in India fighting to restore Waqf properties, repeal the

Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), or challenge the systemic "bulldozer justice" that has become a hallmark of state administration. The Overton window, the range of policies politically acceptable to the mainstream population, has shifted so far to the right that the "moderate" position in 2026 is merely a slower, more polite version of Hindutva. The debate is no longer between secularism and communalism; it is between those who want a Hindu state immediately and those who are content to let it evolve organically.

The death of "composite nationalism" the Nehruvian ideal that India belonged equally to all its faiths, has profound implications for the social contract. For decades, the Indian Muslim community relied on the protection of the Constitution and the mediation of secular parties. That protection has proved to be a paper shield.

The new social contract is one of institutionalised precarity. India is not Myanmar; there is no immediate threat of mass expulsion or state-sponsored ethnic cleansing on a genocidal scale. Instead, the 200 million Muslims of India are being prepared for a future of permanent management. It is a "separate but equal" doctrine in spirit, if not in law.

In this new normalcy, minorities will be granted just enough representation to allow the state to claim it remains a democracy on the international stage. They will be provided just enough basic services, water, electricity, digital infrastructure, to satisfy the requirements of "humanity" and global development indices. And they will be expected to maintain just enough silence to claim that the country is at "peace." It is a peace of the graveyard, where the noise of dissent is replaced by the quiet hum of survival.

Historically, the Indian judiciary was seen as the final arbiter of constitutional morality. However, the post-Modi horizon suggests a legal landscape where the courts are increasingly reluctant to counter the "majoritarian will." The legal system has become a labyrinth of procedural delays for the marginalised and express lanes for the powerful.

The systematic use of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) has turned the legal process itself into the punishment. When the state identifies a "threat" to the majoritarian order, the judicial machinery often acts as an accelerant rather than a brake. For the minority community, the future is defined by "one legal loss at a time." Each verdict that

privileges faith over evidence or state security over individual liberty becomes a new brick in the wall of the majoritarian state.

Perhaps the most devastating impact of this era is the hollowed-out nature of Indian culture. The Bollywood that once celebrated a syncretic "Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb" (the blended culture of the plains) has been largely conscripted into producing hagiographies of historical Hindu heroes and contemporary nationalist myths. Literature, art, and academia are under constant surveillance by digital lynch mobs, ensuring that any voice that challenges the majoritarian narrative is silenced through de-platforming or legal harassment.

The loss of this cultural synthesis is not just a loss for the minority; it is a loss for the Indian identity itself. India is becoming a smaller, more insecure version of itself, a civilizational state that is terrified of its own internal diversity.

As we look toward the horizon, it is clear that the "New India" is no longer new, it is the status quo. The 200 million-strong Muslim population, along with other dissenting groups, must now navigate a landscape where the state is no longer a neutral umpire but a committed player for the other side.

The struggle for the soul of India has moved beyond the ballot box. It is now a battle of endurance. Resistance in this era does not look like grand political movements; it looks like the stubborn preservation of memory, the quiet education of the next generation, and the refusal to accept precarity as a natural state of being.

The dream of a return to the pre-2014 status quo is a distraction. That world is gone. The challenge of the post-Modi era is to find a way to live, breathe, and eventually thrive within a majoritarian normalcy that seeks to turn citizens into subjects. The composite nationalism of the founders may be dead, but the people who believed in it remain. For them, the horizon is dark, but it is the only one they have. They must learn to navigate it, not with the hope of a quick rescue, but with the grit of those who know they are home, even if the house no longer recognises them.

**India's other 200 million**

**Avani Devi**

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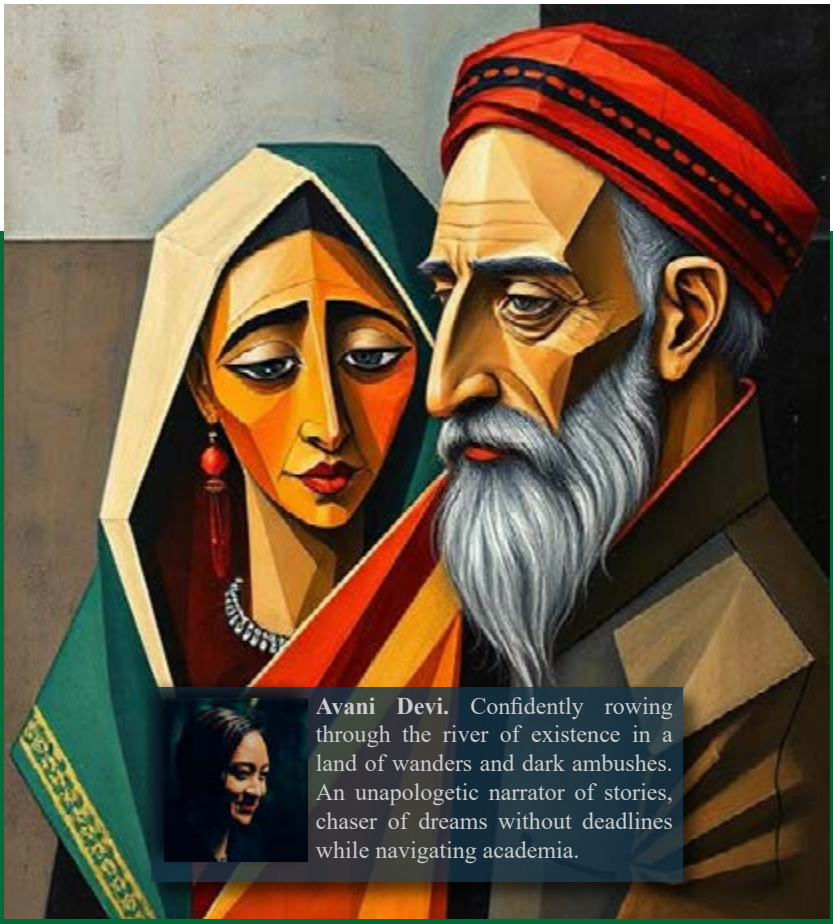
# INDIA'S OTHER 200 MILLION

AVANI DEVI





**Avani Devi.** Confidently rowing through the river of existence in a land of wanders and dark ambushes. An unapologetic narrator of stories, chaser of dreams without deadlines while navigating academia.